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Abstract

Objective: Gender differences among children with ADHD are not well understood. The continuous performance test (CPT) is the most frequently used direct measure of inattention and impulsivity. This meta-analysis compared CPT performance between boys and girls with and without ADHD. **Method:** All peer-reviewed ADHD studies published between 1980 and 2010 that used a CPT and enabled gender comparison were included. Gender differences in commission (impulsivity) and omission (inattention) errors were analyzed. **Results:** Included studies comprised a sample of 772 boys and 325 girls with ADHD. Findings show that boys were significantly more impulsive than girls, but no difference with inattention was found. Within-gender analysis revealed that the difference among boys with and without ADHD was significantly larger than the difference among girls with and without ADHD. **Conclusion:** The results indicate that gender is a significant moderating factor in the assessment of core ADHD symptoms when using CPTs. (*J. of Att. Dis.* 2012; 16(3) 190-198)

Keywords

ADD/ADHD, gender, inattention, response inhibition

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder prevalent among 3-7% of school-age children (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; 4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). It is generally characterized by persistent symptoms of inattention, disinhibition, or hyperactivity that lead to poor behavioral, educational, and social functioning (DuPaul & Stoner, 2003; Nigg, 2006). ADHD is currently diagnosed along three subtypes that are defined based on three core behaviors: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (APA, 2000). Although girls and boys with ADHD may demonstrate all or some of these core behaviors, the presentation of ADHD with regard to gender is not well understood.

Gender differences in ADHD. Gender has been considered a significant moderating factor in ADHD research for more than two decades (Arnold, 1996). Despite this recognition, research into the influence of gender on ADHD has been historically limited because much of the past research has excluded girls, involved relatively low numbers of girls in research samples, failed to control for possible gender effects when reporting outcomes, or lacked comparison between girls with and girls without ADHD (Rucklidge, 2008; Tannock, 1998). A review of 70 published ADHD studies involving a combined total of 4,873 children, from 1987 to 1994, found that 81% of research participants were boys (Hartung & Widiger, 1998, p. 265).

The most commonly cited gender differences in children with ADHD are related to prevalence rates, impulsivity-hyperactivity levels, and patterns of co-occurring disorders (Gaub & Carlson, 1997). For example, boys outnumber girls 3-to-1 in community samples and 9-to-1 in clinical samples (APA, 2000). Specifically, boys are likely to be more hyperactive and impulsive and to have more comorbid externalizing disorders (e.g., conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder), whereas girls are more likely to be inattentive and to have comorbid internalizing disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression; APA, 2000; Gaub & Carlson, 1997). A study conducted more than 25 years ago highlighted how contextual bias can result in the underidentification of girls with ADHD because girls are not as externalizing (Berry, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 1985). However, others have maintained that boys and girls with ADHD are more alike than different (Rucklidge, 2008). Researchers have suggested that although females experience core symptoms similar to

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males and continue to experience symptoms throughout the life span, only females with severe symptoms are identified (Rucklidge, 2008). Although boys with ADHD are identified to be more hyperactive and impulsive, many girls with ADHD also experience dysfunctional levels of hyperactivity and impulsivity. It continues to be the case that further studies are needed to examine how gender influences the assessment and treatment of ADHD.

In addition to the gender discrepancies that are typically seen in ADHD studies, variability in clinical assessment has hindered researchers' understanding of how gender moderates ADHD. The diagnosis of ADHD remains descriptive and is traditionally made through child behavioral observations, clinical interviews, and behavioral rating scales completed by parents and teachers (Barkley, 2006; Nigg, 2006). Rating scales are very efficient in profiling the symptoms of ADHD; however, it has been suggested that they may be neither precise nor sufficient (Barkley, 2006). In addition, rating scales may be unreliable when used to monitor symptoms over time. For example, there is significant cross-grade instability in how teachers complete ADHD rating scales (Rabiner et al., 2010). Rating scales also vary as a function of the student's gender (Bussing et al., 2009). Such instability has led some researchers and clinicians to seek out more direct assessment methods for core ADHD symptoms.

Continuous performance tests (CPTs). Neuropsychological instruments enhance the assessment of ADHD by providing a directly observational, norm-referenced measure. One such test, extensively used in research and clinical settings, is the CPT. The CPT is meant to assess one's ability to inhibit responses and to sustain attention, two of the core deficits of ADHD (Barkley, 1997). It is a computer-based vigilance task in which participants are asked to press a button when they see or hear the target stimuli and to withhold action to non-target stimuli. There are two CPT outcome measures of core ADHD symptoms: omission and commission errors. Omission errors indicate the number of failures to respond to a target stimulus and are related to inattentiveness. Commission errors reflect responses to a non-target stimulus and are related to impulsivity (Corkum & Siegel, 1993). Many studies have found the CPT to be a sensitive, reliable, and ecologically valid measure (for a full review, see Riccio, Reynolds, & Lowe, 2001). Using CPTs as part of a neuropsychological battery can improve diagnostic precision and differentiation from other co-occurring disorders and may have the potential to reduce gender bias in diagnosis (Seidman et al., 1997).

CPTs have become the most commonly used neuropsychological instrument to measure inattention and impulsivity (Riccio et al., 2001). The influence of gender on CPT performance among children with ADHD is not well understood. Studies of gender differences on CPT performance have been inconsistent (Breen, 1989; Seidman et al., 1997). Prior studies have documented gender differences among

children with ADHD in inattention and impulsivity using behavioral rating scales and neuropsychological measures (Gaub & Carlson, 1997; Gershon, 2002). However, to date, studies examining gender differences on CPT performance among children with ADHD have not been evaluated using a meta-analytic synthesis.

Current study. This study examines differences between boys and girls with and without ADHD on CPT performance using a meta-analytical approach. Consistent with previous research, CPT omission errors were used as a measure of inattention, and CPT commission errors were used as an impulsivity outcome. Boys, who are thought to be more externalizing, are hypothesized to have higher commission error means than will girls with ADHD. Prior studies have shown that girls are more likely to be diagnosed with the predominantly inattentive subtype of ADHD (ADHD-PI), appear to display more internalizing symptoms, and thus are expected to have higher omission error means than are boys with ADHD. Normative differences were also examined in boys and girls without ADHD. Last, the discrepancy in CPT performance between boys and girls without ADHD was compared with that of boys and girls with ADHD. The aim was to examine whether there are differences that would contribute to our understanding of how gender moderates the core symptoms of ADHD.

Method

Literature Search

The articles for the study were selected through multiple computerized literature searches using PsychINFO and MEDLINE databases. A manual search through the reference lists of each selected study was then performed. The search began after establishing a priori inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1).

Children and adolescents were included in this study because the assessment of adult ADHD is much more variable than childhood ADHD. Omission and commission errors were targeted because they are reliable measures of core ADHD symptoms (Riccio et al., 2001). Children with a primary diagnosis of ADHD were required because the CPT is sensitive to other disorders (e.g., general anxiety disorder, schizophrenia; Riccio et al., 2001). Only studies that were published in English were considered for language purposes. The criterion for including only peer-reviewed studies was meant to increase the quality of studies included in the meta-analysis. Also, "1980" was used as a cutoff year for the search because it corresponded with the release of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed.; *DSM-III*; APA, 1980), which, for the first time, included attention problems as part of the ADHD diagnosis. The searches were conducted between August 1, 2009, and October 30, 2009. The following keywords were

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

1	Study sample must contain school-age (age 6-18) children diagnosed with ADHD.
2	The study must have used and reported omission and/or commission errors from a CPT.
3	The data reported must enable cross-gender comparison.
4	A study was excluded if the ADHD sample contained participants who were primarily diagnosed with a learning disability, conduct disorder, oppositional and defiant disorder, anxiety, or depression.
5	A study was excluded if members of the ADHD sample were on medications at the time of testing.
6	A study was excluded if it was not published in a peer-reviewed journal.
7	The study must have been published in English between 1980 and 2009.

Note: CPT = continuous performance test.

used during the search process: *ADHD*, *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*, *gender differences*, *sex differences*, *cognitive*, *neuropsychological*, *executive function*, *continuous performance test*, *CPT*, *continuous performance task*, *Conners Continuous Performance Test*, *Gordon Diagnostic System*, *GDS*, *Test of Variable Attention*, and *TOVA*.

Variables of Interest

The following demographic information was collected: gender ratio, age, IQ, type of CPT, *DSM* version, and year of study. Age and IQ were examined for any moderating effects because both have been demonstrated to moderate CPT performance (Riccio et al., 2001). Boys and girls diagnosed with ADHD were compared with each other and to same-gender control groups.

Calculating Effect Sizes

The means and standard deviations were recorded for age, IQ, omission errors, and commission errors (Table 3). Effect sizes were calculated using the Matlab Software version r2009a and meta-analysis formulas found in Lipsey and Wilson (2001). The meta-analysis began by computing pooled standard deviation (*SD_p*) for each study. Next, group mean differences were divided by the corresponding *SD_p* to compute biased standardized mean difference effect sizes. Mean differences were multiplied by a correction factor (Hedges, 1981). The unbiased effect size was calculated using the following formula:

$$ES'_{sm} = \left[1 - \frac{3}{4N - 9} \right] ES_{sm}.$$

To synthesize results from the included studies, each effect size was weighted by sample size from the corresponding study. The standard error (*SE*) of the standardized mean difference effect size was calculated by using the following formula to compute the proper weight:

$$w_{sm} = \frac{1}{SE_{sm}^2} = \frac{2n_{G1}n_{G2}(n_{G1} + n_{G2})}{2(n_{G1} + n_{G2})^2 + n_{G1}n_{G2}(ES'_{sm})^2}.$$

This formula provides the inverse variance weight that corresponds to each of the standardized mean difference effect sizes. This step enabled the computation of the average weighted mean effect size by using the following formula:

$$\overline{ES} = \frac{\sum(w_i ES_i)}{\sum w_i}.$$

Next, the *SE* of the previously computed average weighted mean effect size was calculated by using the following formula:

$$SE_{sm} = \sqrt{\frac{n_{G1} + n_{G2}}{n_{G1}n_{G2}} + \frac{(ES'_{sm})^2}{2(n_{G1} + n_{G2})}}.$$

The *SE* and the average weighted mean effect size were used to compute the confidence interval (*CI*) to identify the statistical significance of the obtained results.

$$\overline{ES}_L = \overline{ES} - z_{(1-\alpha)}(SE_{\overline{ES}})$$

$$\overline{ES}_U = \overline{ES} + z_{(1-\alpha)}(SE_{\overline{ES}})$$

The *Q*-statistic was used to determine the equivalency of the sample population used in the selected studies (Hedges & Olkin, 1985). Variances in the dependent variables of age and IQ were also examined. The *Q*-statistic provides a test for the homogeneity of variance among the effect sizes calculated from each study. To do this, the formula below was used, which is distributed as a chi-square with *k* - 1 degrees of freedom where *k* is the number of effect sizes:

$$Q = \sum w_i (ES_i - \overline{ES})^2.$$

The analysis compared weighted grand effect size for omission and commission errors, age, and IQ. The effect sizes provide the magnitude and direction of the difference in performance on omission and commission errors. Scores of females were subtracted from scores of males, and control groups were subtracted from ADHD groups on all variables. Thus, positive effect sizes show higher means for

Table 2. Excluded Studies

Reasons for exclusion	Number of studies
No gender-based stratification of data	196
No CPT	69
Medications involved in study	54
Replicated across searches	33
No formal diagnosis of ADHD	17
Nonempirical studies (e.g., reviews)	16

Note: CPT = continuous performance test.

males and negative effect sizes show higher means for females. When comparing ADHD samples with controls, positive effect sizes indicate higher means for the ADHD sample and negative effect sizes indicate higher means for control samples.

Results

Selected Studies

The search strategies yielded a total of 393 studies. After reviewing the Methods, Results, and Discussion sections of each study, a total of 8 studies met the established a priori criteria (see Table 2 for exclusion reasons). The included studies were published in peer-reviewed journals, and the publication dates ranged from 1989 to 2006. In all, 2 studies used the *DSM-III* (Arcia & Conners, 1998; Breen, 1989), 2 studies used the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed., rev.; *DSM-III-R*; APA, 1987; Horn, Wanger, & Jalongo, 1989; Seidman et al., 2005), and 4 studies used the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; *DSM-IV*; APA, 1994; McGee, Clark, & Symons, 2000; Newcorn et al., 2001; Rucklidge, 2006; Yang, Jong, Chung, & Chen, 2004) to establish diagnostic criteria. There were no interactions between outcomes and the type of diagnostic criteria used. None of the studies stratified results according to subtype and gender. A minimal IQ inclusion criterion ranging between 70 and 80 standard score points was established in all of the studies captured for this review. Four studies included a comparative control sample (Breen, 1989; McGee et al., 2000; Rucklidge, 2006; Seidman et al., 2005), but only one of those studies had a female control group (Breen, 1989).

Demographic Information

The eight studies generated a sample of 772 boys and 325 girls with ADHD that were statistically comparable in age ($Q = 10.61$; $n = 8$) and IQ ($Q = 3.95$; $n = 6$). The demographic characteristics of the captured sample are shown in Table 3. The age range of the participants varied among

studies. Six studies included children between the age of 6 and 11 years. The remaining two studies sampled adolescents and children ranging from 9 to 17 years of age (Rucklidge, 2006; Seidman et al., 2005). Approximately 65% of the sample was predominately middle-class White children (78% or greater). Racial and social economic information for the remainder of the sample was not specified. The samples from all studies came from clinical settings. Four of the eight studies were university based, and the other four came from pediatric clinics. Six of the studies were conducted in the United States, and the other two were done in Taiwan (Yang et al., 2004) and New Zealand (Rucklidge, 2006).

CPTs Used

Information on the CPTs used in the studies is shown in Table 3. Seven of the eight studies used a visual CPT; the other used an auditory CPT (Seidman et al., 2005). Three of the eight studies used the Conners' CPT (Not-X), four used AX-CPT type and one study used auditory CPT (Seidman et al., 2005). No study provided information on how the CPT was implemented, including whether the experimenter was present, whether the space bar or mouse was used, or whether a PC or laptop was used. In addition, none of the included studies provided any information on the fit between the norms of the CPTs and the samples used.

CPTs and Gender

The main goal of the study was to examine whether gender differences exist on CPT outcomes of omission and commission errors for children with ADHD. Results and descriptive data from included studies are presented in Table 3. Seven of the eight studies enabled cross-gender comparison with respect to commission errors. Six of the seven studies reported that boys were more likely to commit commission errors (Arcia & Conners, 1998; McGee et al., 2000; Newcorn et al., 2001; Rucklidge, 2006; Seidman et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2004). After the seven studies were synthesized, a statistically significant, $d = .31$ (95% CI = [0.17, 0.45]), general pattern of boys making more commission errors than girls emerged (Figure 1). Six studies provided cross-gender comparisons with respect to omission errors, four of which found girls more likely to commit such errors than boys (Horn et al., 1989; Newcorn et al., 2001; Rucklidge, 2006; Yang et al., 2004). After the six studies were synthesized, no statistical significance was observed with respect to omission errors interacting with gender, $d = -.09$ (95% CI = [-0.27, 0.09]).

Control males were compared with control females on commission errors to examine normative gender

Table 3. Results and Descriptive Data From Included Studies

Studies	Sample		Age		IQ		Omission errors ES		Commission errors ES*	CPT type	DSM version	Sample source
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F				
Arcia and Conners (1998)	280	80	10.8 (1.1)	11.1 (1.6)	106	105	NA	NA	.27	Not-X-CPT (Conners, 1992)	DSM-III	Clinical
Breen (1989)	13	13	6-11	6-11	NA	NA	NA	NA	-.13	AX-CPT GDS**	DSM-III	Clinical
Horn, Wanger, and Jalongo (1989)	37	17	8.1 (1.5)	8.2 (1.3)	101.7 (17.4)	90.7 (16.7)	-.34	-.34	.09	AX-CPT (Klee & Garfinkel 1983)	DSM-III-R	Clinical
McGee, Clark, and Symons (2000)	45	9	7.5 (1.4)	7.5 (1.4)	NA	NA	NA	NA	.55	Not-X-CPT	DSM-IV	Clinical
Newcorn et al. (2001)	127	31	7.76 (.77)	7.76 (.77)	101.4	101.3	-0.14	-0.14	.64	AX-CPT	DSM-IV	Clinical
Rucklidge (2006)	24	25	14.8 (.99)	14.9 (1.2)	98.5 (14.1)	97.1 (11.1)	-0.21	-0.21	.20	Not-X-CPT	DSM-IV-TR	Clinical
Seidman et al. (2005)	103	101	13.5 (2.2)	12.5 (2.6)	109 (13.5)	106 (11.5)	-0.11	-0.11	.22	Auditory CPT	DSM-III-R	Clinical
Yang, Jong, Chung, and Chen (2004)	21	21	8.1 (1.4)	8.1 (1.4)	98 (11.6)	97 (7.7)	-0.11	-0.11	.37	AX-CPT	DSM-IV	Clinical
Total	772	325	Range 7.5-14.88	Range 7.5-14.9	Range 98-109	Range 90-106	-.09	-.09	.31			

Note: CPT = continuous performance test; GDS = Gordon Diagnostic System; DSM = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd ed.); DSM-III-R = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd ed., rev.); DSM-IV = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed); ES = Effect Size.

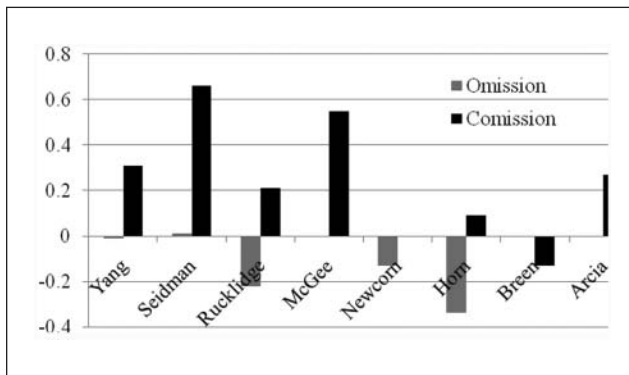


Figure 1. Effect size gender differences

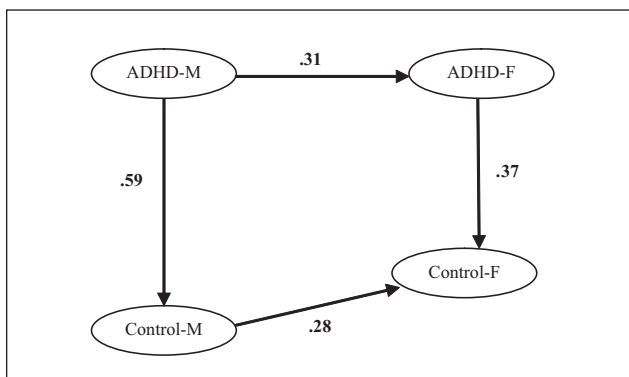


Figure 2. The differences between and within genders

differences on the CPT (see Table 4). The weighted mean differences between control males and control females were statistically significant $d = .28$ (95% CI = [0.16, 0.40]). Two other comparisons were computed to examine the differences between boys and girls with ADHD with same-gender control groups. The first comparison between boys with ADHD and boys in the control group resulted in statistically significant $d = .59$ (95% CI = [0.42, 0.71]). The differences in impulsivity between females with ADHD and females in the control groups were also statistically significant, $d = .38$ (95% CI = [0.26, 0.49]). The magnitude of difference between boys with ADHD and same-gender norms was also significantly different as compared with the magnitude of difference between girls with ADHD and same-gender norms, $d = .22$ (95% CI = [0.11, 0.33]). Four studies were synthesized to compare commission errors between and among boys and girls with and without ADHD (Breen, 1989; Horn et al., 1989; Rucklidge, 2006; Seidman et al., 2005; see Figure 2).

The effect of CPT paradigm on gender differences was examined. The sample contained three different CPTs from six different developers: the AX-CPT (Gordon Diagnostic System [GDS]; Halperin, 1991; Mirsky, 1991), Not-X-CPT and an auditory CPT (Seidman et al., 2005). Four studies used an AX-CPT, two used a Not-X paradigm, and one used an auditory CPT requiring a response to tonal targets. Separate syntheses were conducted for all the AX-CPT, all the Not-X-CPT, and the auditory CPT on omission and commission errors. The three separate syntheses were compared with each other and to the combined synthesis of all the CPT types using CIs. Results indicated that the CPT type did not significantly contribute to the overall findings on either omission or commission errors (Figure 3). However, the heterogeneity of the CPT types and the different weights imposed on each study (based on sample size) precludes any firm conclusion on the extent that each paradigm contributed to overall gender differences.

Discussion

The core symptoms of ADHD, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention are often assessed among school-age children through standardized behavior rating scales that are completed by teachers and parents. Significant gender differences have been identified in normative samples on standardized rating scales, but differences in gender performances on direct CPT measures of impulsivity and inattention have received less attention. This is the first meta-analysis to systematically examine gender differences on CPT performance. In the study sample, no significant heterogeneity occurred among the sample effect sizes, and the samples were statistically comparable with no significant differences in age and IQ. Thus, the results of the study appear to be interpretable.

Between-Gender Differences

The results of this study indicated a small but significant gender difference in CPT commission, but not omission, errors among children with ADHD. This suggests that inhibitory control, but not inattention, may be mediated by gender. Consistent with rating scale studies (Gaub & Carlson, 1997; Gershon, 2002), boys committed significantly more commission errors. Most of the studies used in this analysis documented girls committing more omission errors (inattention). There was no significant difference among boys and girls with ADHD when all the studies were synthesized together.

Whereas the finding of greater hyperactivity was expected, the lack of gender differences in inattention was unexpected. One possible reason could be that all of the samples used in this study came from clinical settings. It has been

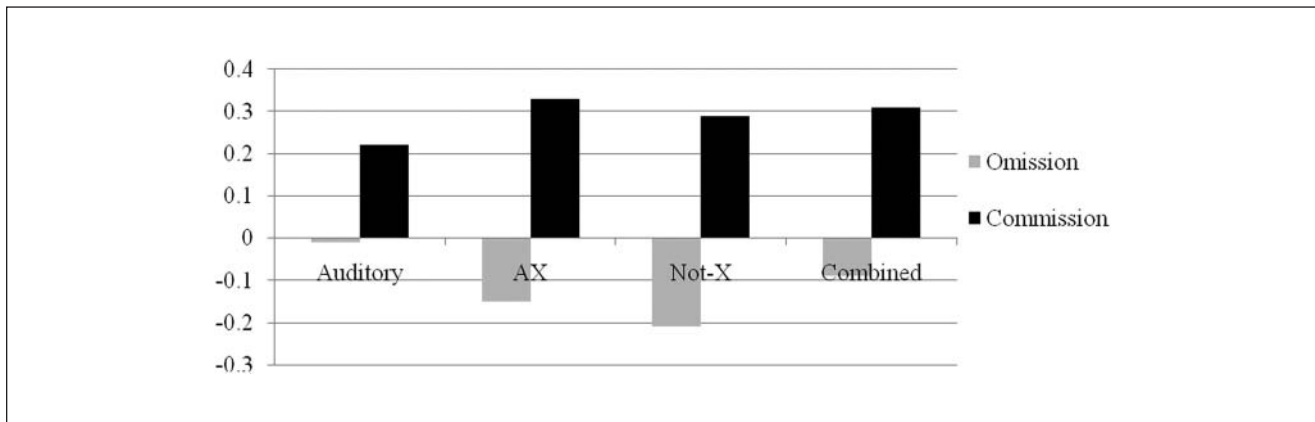


Figure 3. Gender differences according to specific CPT modality
 Note: CPT = continuous performance test.

suggested that a disproportionately low number of girls are referred to clinical settings, and those who are referred are often more hyperactive and inattentive than nonreferred girls (Biederman et al., 2002). This observation has been explained by others as a bias in the referral process and diagnostic criteria (Barkley, 2006; Gaub & Carlson, 1997). Girls may also experience a qualitatively different set of comorbid symptoms. For instance, because girls tend to be more internalizing rather than externalizing, struggles related to core ADHD symptoms may be overlooked. Thus, girls from clinical settings may not be representative of girls with ADHD in general.

Within-Gender Differences

An interesting pattern emerged when comparing boys and girls with ADHD to same-gender children without ADHD. Prior studies have attributed ADHD gender differences primarily to bias in referral and assessment procedures. Remaining differences between genders were attributed simply to normative gender differences (Barkley, 2006). In this study, the difference between boys and girls with ADHD on commission errors was similar to the difference among boys and girls without ADHD. In contrast, the difference between boys with ADHD and boys in the control groups was significantly larger than the differences between girls with ADHD and girls in the control groups. Although the differences between genders are similar among children with and without ADHD, there is potentially substantial discrepancy within gender differences among children with ADHD. This finding is important because it highlights potential gender bias in the evaluation of ADHD.

Limitations

There were important limitations to this study. Most of the included studies did not stratify outcomes by subtype despite an ongoing debate about whether subtypes categorize fundamentally different disorders (Milich et al., 2001). In this study, there was no control for any co-occurring disorders or socioeconomic status (SES). The studies that reported SES information were consistent in that most of the sample was considered middle class. Furthermore, studies that have examined SES as a moderating factor within ADHD research have been inconsistent in their findings (Barkley, 2006). Another significant limitation is the low number of studies used in this analysis. This limitation highlights the lack of research including girls, stratification by subtypes, and better control for comorbidity to enable more comprehensive future analyses.

Conclusion

Some have argued that when assessing ADHD core symptoms, clinical significance cutoffs ought to be gender specific. Prior studies have shown that girls with ADHD are underidentified when they are compared with combined-gender norms (e.g., Waschbusch & King, 2006). The implications from the findings of this study suggest that gender is an important variable to consider when evaluating core symptoms of ADHD using direct measures. The relationship between gender and impulsivity is more pronounced than is the relationship between gender and inattention. Based on these findings, clinicians and researchers alike are encouraged to consider using gender-specific norms, if available, when assessing symptoms of ADHD. Relative differences between girls with and without symptoms of ADHD may

have important implications for the assessment of ADHD among school-age children because girls may have been historically underidentified (Berry et al., 1985).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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